

The Message of Buddhism and the Western World

Caratha bhikkhave cārikam bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānam: Go ye forth, O monks, for the welfare and well-being of many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, comfort and happiness of gods and men'. These were the Lord Buddha's words of admonition to his first missionaries and he himself went forth, going from village to village, delivering his message of the Dhamma to the people, from anything up to seven, eight or nine months of the year. The arahants of the day and other disciples followed suit.

The remarkably distinct character of Buddhist missionary activity is that it never had a spirit of conversion or proselytisation. Its message was for the acceptance of those who had ears to hear: Ye sotavanto pamu×cantu saddham. It means 'those who have ears to hear let them release faith'. It is for this reason that over a period of nearly 2580 years, from the enlightenment of the Buddha up to date, not a drop of blood had been shed in the propagation of the faith. There had been no other strategy used, except the strength of the true word, the dhamma.

The word of the Buddha or the message of Buddhism is full of that strength. During the life time of the Buddha his religion spread through out the Middle Region of the Gangetic valley, and subsequently during the reign of King Asoka it spread throughout the Indian subcontinent and up to the western end of the Middle East region and in Sri Lanka and Burma. During the reign of King Kanishka it spread to China and Mongolia, and during the Sailendra dynasty to Indonesia and Malayasia.

Even after a thousand years from the passing away of the Buddha, i.e. about 450 A.C. European countries had not reached a very high level of culture. No

land known as America even existed. Some scholars hold the view that about 70% of the world population at that time were Buddhists. Around the eighteenth fifties, some opine, half the world population were Buddhists. According to statistics collected by Prof. T.W. Rhys Davids in 1877 some 40% of world population were Buddhists. The Christians at that time were only 25%. But through the strength of their religious propaganda it has to day reached 50% level. Nevertheless, the wise among them come in search of the message of Buddhism. About half the population in Great Britain believe in rebirth. Even other countries are heading in this direction.

A pioneer in the field of Buddhist missionary activities in the present age was the Ven. Nārada Mahā Thera of the Vajirārāmaya in Sri Lanka. So was Anagārika Dharmapāla, the founder of the Mahābodhi Society. To day Buddhist missionary activity at a world level has developed by leaps and bounds. To day there are practising Buddhists in 51 countries, and U.S.A. occupies a very distinct place. The Buddhist Vihāras and Buddhist Societies there, both Mahayana and Theravada number 306. Of these 49 are located in California. These figures are according to statistics of 1984. The figures to day, we presume would indicate an appreciable increase.

Through Chinese and Japanese leadership Mahayana Buddhism reached America a long time ago. Most of the viharas referred to earlier are of the Mahayana division. The first Theravada centre established there was the Washington Buddhist Vihāra started by the Sasana Sevaka Society of Maharagama in 1965. To day there are nearly 100 Theravada temples and 500 Theravada Buddhist monks. There are four distinguished personalities one has to think of when speaking of Buddhism in America, namely Sir Edwin Arnold, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, Prof.H.D.Warren and Prof.E.W.Burlingame.

The Ven. Ittapāna Dhammāṅkārā is an erudite Buddhist scholar and an eminent preacher. He is an excellent organiser of activities and in Sri Lanka he has shown his skill in all these areas. As a Buddhist missionary in America he

has also shown his skill and the bhāvanā centre he has started with the kind assistance of Dr.P.M.Sarath Chandra under the name of Maitri Vihara would undoubtedly render excellent service to the cause of Buddhism. It is a commendable gesture of social service.

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